ANCIENT FUTURES

The Art of the Blacksmith

at the third millennium

April 5 through May 5, 2001

The Mary E. Black Gallery
Nova Scotia Centre for Craft and Design

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition *ANCIENT FUTURES: The Art of The Blacksmith at the Third Millennium*, curated by Christopher C. Huck for the Mary E. Black Gallery of the Nova Scotia Centre for Craft + Design.

EXHIBITION: April 5 - May 5, 2001

GUEST ARTIST LECTURE: Friday, 12 noon, April 27, 2001
Tom Joyce, Santa Fe, New Mexico
at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia Lecture Hall

PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION AND WORKSHOP: Saturday, April 28, 2001
Tom Joyce, Santa Fe, New Mexico
at The Lunenburg Forge, 146 Bluenose Drive, Lunenburg

For further information please call: (902)634.7125

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INTRODUCTION

Chris Tyler
Nova Scotia Centre for Craft and Design

For ten years, the Mary E. Black Gallery has held exhibitions mainly of craftspeople and designers from Nova Scotia, and sometimes included the work of creators from other parts of Atlantic Canada. Rarely have we had an international exhibition of this scope which includes Nova Scotians!

The work and vision of curator Chris Huck have assembled an extraordinary group of works and an unprecedented package of sponsorship to match.

The curator's view that work in iron speaks eloquently of a commitment to materials and process is a fundamental insight into the particular interests and focus of artistic work in craft media. While well aware of alternative theories of art making, many artists in craft media persist in an approach which finds continual refreshment in the material and in the tradition. The continued appeal of this vision is an important cultural phenomenon.

It is our hope that the exposure of work of such excellence will increase the interest in the medium across the Province and in the Atlantic region.

March, 2001
Halifax, Nova Scotia

EXHIBITORS

Mike Boone	Paonia, Colorado
Fred Borcherdt	Bonita, Arizona
Elizabeth Brim	Penland, North Carolina
E.A. Chase	Santa Cruz, California
Frederic Crist	Waynesboro, Virginia
Stefan Dürst	Münich, Germany
Rico Eastman	Sante Fe, New Mexico
Laurie Fisher	Lunenburg, Nova Scotia
Sebastian Hepp	Münich, Germany
Christopher Huck	Lunenburg, Nova Scotia
Russell Jaqua	Port Townsend, Washington
Tom Joyce	Sante Fe, New Mexico
Takayoshi Komine	Kikigun, Saitama, Japan
John Little	East Dover, Nova Scotia
Christina Shmigel	St. Louis, Missouri
Brad Silberberg	Silver Spring, Maryland
Michael Spencer	Italy Cross, Nova Scotia
Samuel Yellin	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Stephen Yusko	St. Louis, Missouri
David Zatz	Brooklyn, New York

ANCIENT FUTURES: The Art of the Blacksmith at the Third Millennium

Christopher C. Huck, Curator

What is a blacksmith today? And what relevance does his or her work have to our lives as we enter this fast-paced, mass-produced, plugged-in Third Millennium? Ten years ago, I had never set foot in a blacksmith shop. As a child growing up on the south side of Chicago, I could hear the giant hammers of the steel mills on sultry summer nights when the wind blew in just the right direction. But if I had thought about blacksmiths at all, it would have been as big, burly, uneducated guys, working in dimly lit, dirty and chaotic old sheds of buildings, making horseshoes.

But after what seemed like a lifetime of toil flogging stocks and bonds in the financial marketplace of Canada's great neighbour to the south, I set out to discover a life and a life's work of genuineness and natural richness, of creativity, of discovery and endless learning. I didn't know where I would find it, or what it was that I would find, but I knew I had to begin looking, before it was too late. My first step was to move to Nova Scotia.

One blustery winter's day, three years later, I stumbled on a short newspaper article about an old, third-generation marine blacksmith from a once-thriving fishing and ship-building town on the craggy south coast of the Province, who was lamenting the lack of a successor. Alongside the story was a photograph of the old blacksmith standing beside his blazing forge. Instantly I knew my search was over.

After beginning my apprenticeship - as a volunteer in that old marine blacksmith shop - I eagerly plumbed all available books which illustrated the works of grand old masters, such as Fritz Kühn of Berlin, Otto Schmirler of Vienna, and Samuel Yellin of Philadelphia, who had all ceased working years earlier. For while the smell of the coal forge in the old shop was intoxicating, and the cast of characters coming and going during the course of a week beyond all description, the breadth and depth of the work of the shop, and the skills necessary to perform that work, fell far short of what I knew was possible with this stubborn material. I soon discovered that there were a very few older master metalworkers teaching the nearly-lost methods and techniques of the artist-as-blacksmith to new students like me at a small handful of craft centres and schools in the U.S., such as the John C. Campbell Folk School, in Brasstown, North Carolina, and the Penland School of Crafts, in Penland, North Carolina. I discovered their availability through the flourishing Artist Blacksmith's Association of North America (ABANA), a group whose published quarterly magazine and biennial conferences with up to a thousand attendees, have provided an invaluable ground of inspiration, learning, and connection with many fine artists.

Christopher Huck
Slip-stock Anchor

These possibilities have grown out of a movement that had started years earlier. Blacksmiths and their ancient, extraordinary craft were on virtual life-support when the social and moral tumult of the 1960's propelled many young people - my peers - to turn to neglected and discarded arts and crafts from an earlier and un-mechanized time as an alternative to the seemingly meaningless path of the corporate management trainee. The renaissance of modern blacksmithing as a true art form had begun, and as that renaissance blossomed, new works by a new generation gave a fresh definition to the concept of hand-forged iron.

With but three years' experience at the anvil, I learned that Francis Whitaker, an 89 year-old mentor to many of the smiths presented in this exhibition, and himself once an apprentice in the shop of the great Samuel Yellin, was conducting individual master classes of 7 to 10 days duration with select journeymen smiths at his studio in Carbondale, Colorado. Assuming Whitaker would not live long enough to teach me once I had finally attained the competency of a journeyman smith, and anxious to learn from a true master how to make more than a good anchor, I wrote to Whitaker and expressed my eagerness to travel to his shop and study under him. Surprisingly, he agreed, but asked that I forward a portfolio of my work along with my project proposal. Knowing that my previous work would probably never measure up to his exacting standards, I arrived at his shop without ever submitting

the portfolio. Convincing him twice during those eight long days not to dismiss me as a student (read: to not summarily throw me out of his shop), I completed the project as much to my amazement, I think, as to his. My journey on the path of the artist-blacksmith had truly begun.

TRUTH TO MATERIAL

Perhaps foremost among the departed old masters of North America stands Samuel Yellin, who worked in Philadelphia from 1909 until his death in 1940. Yellin's complete mastery of iron, and his unwavering dedication to working in this medium with a rare honesty and integrity, was developed over many years of rigorous training in Europe. He was profoundly influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th Century. William Morris became the most prominent, if not the first critic of the appalling mediocrity of design and craftsmanship emerging in the mass-production, industrialized marketplace. Yellin subsequently produced a body of work in the U.S. of breathtaking beauty, artistry, and technical skill, routinely employing joinery elements of mortise and tenon construction, collars, and rivets as surface ornamentation. Such exposed joinery had become an important element of the Arts and Crafts movement and the underlying principle of "truth to material".

This allegiance to the concept of "truth to material" is the recognition that the physical properties of iron cannot be compromised. A blacksmith has to understand iron's characteristics completely, and accept and yield to them in order to create work that can be deemed excellent. This same honesty to which the master artist-blacksmith subscribes is demonstrated in this unwillingness to conceal techniques used in making a work, to shortcut the process of creation by using artificial manufacturing techniques, or to refer to anything as forged that is not genuinely worked in a fire, over an anvil with a hammer.

I doubt there are any blacksmiths amongst those presented here who would not acknowledge a debt of gratitude to the inspiration provided by the sublime work of Samuel Yellin. For me, Yellin's philosophy permeates all that I do at the anvil, and I would venture to guess that he echoes endlessly in the minds of my colleagues as well.

From anchors to the precise mortise and tenon joinery of a window grill or railing, to the creation of flowers and leaves, and the more playful lines and forms of mobiles, my explorations and experimentation with this medium are ever-changing and always challenging. What is a blacksmith today? This exhibition, which is a glimpse into the evolving worlds of nineteen artist-blacksmiths from Nova Scotia, the U.S., Germany, and Japan - each of whom began their journey with their own version of my anchor - is my answer to that question.

THE ISSUES EXPLORED THROUGH THIS EXHIBITION

EXPLORATIONS IN DESIGN

What currents of design are influencing today's artist-blacksmiths? How have they pushed the boundaries of the old styles to develop new designs and new explorations while remaining true to the integrity of the medium and the tradition? What design considerations come into play when designing work for a public space versus a private collection?

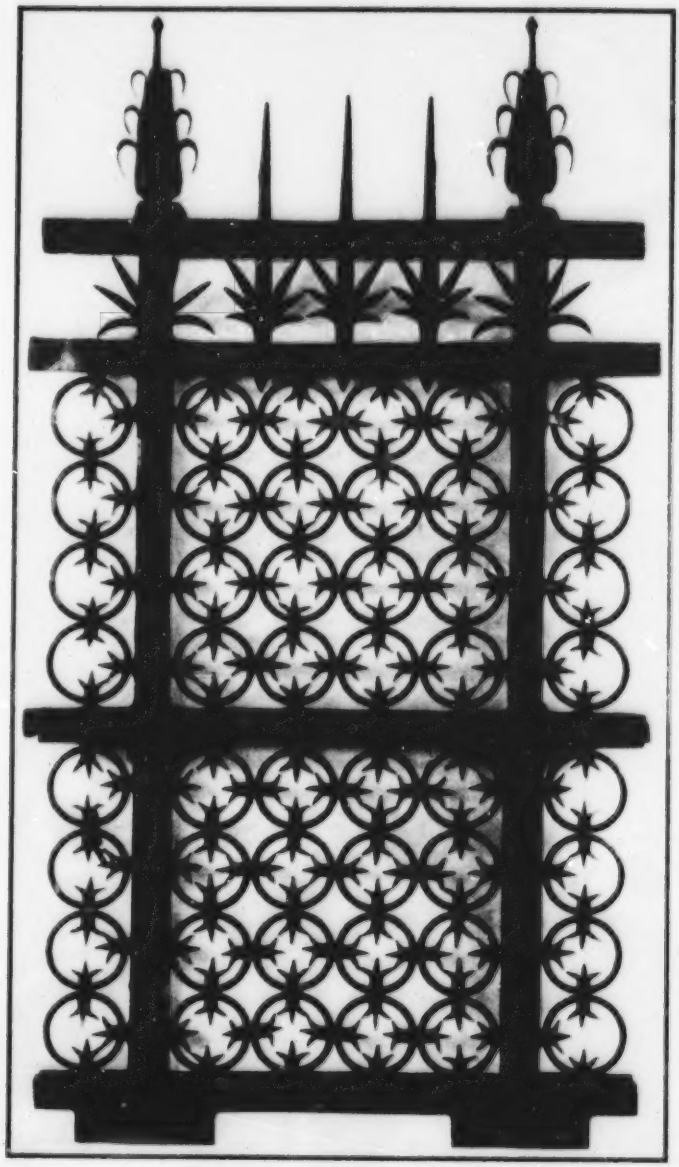
NEW DIRECTIONS WITH TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUES

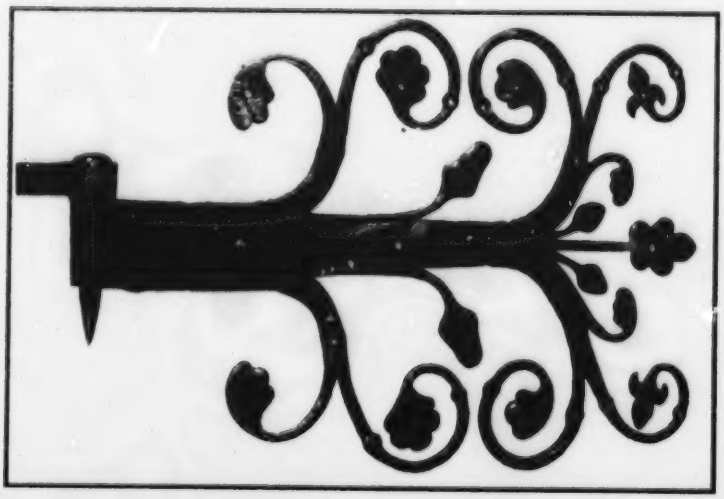
How do artist-blacksmiths employ the traditional joinery techniques of forge-welding, collaring, and riveting, as well as punching, slitting and drifting, chiseling, chasing and splitting in contemporary work?

Four works by Samuel Yellin are included in this exhibition. Except for these four pieces, this exhibition presents current works that reflect the living transmission of the knowledge and mastery of the skills, and some of the thought processes, from the ancient masters; this honesty, integrity, and artistry which underlies the new directions each of the represented artists are taking this timeless tradition as we enter the Third Millennium. Each of these artists continues an unbroken lineage of master artist-blacksmiths dating from Middle Eastern antiquity. And each is producing contemporary work of timeless quality and execution.

March, 2001
Lunenburg, Nova Scotia

Samuel Yellin
1885 - 1940
at the anvil
with a striker



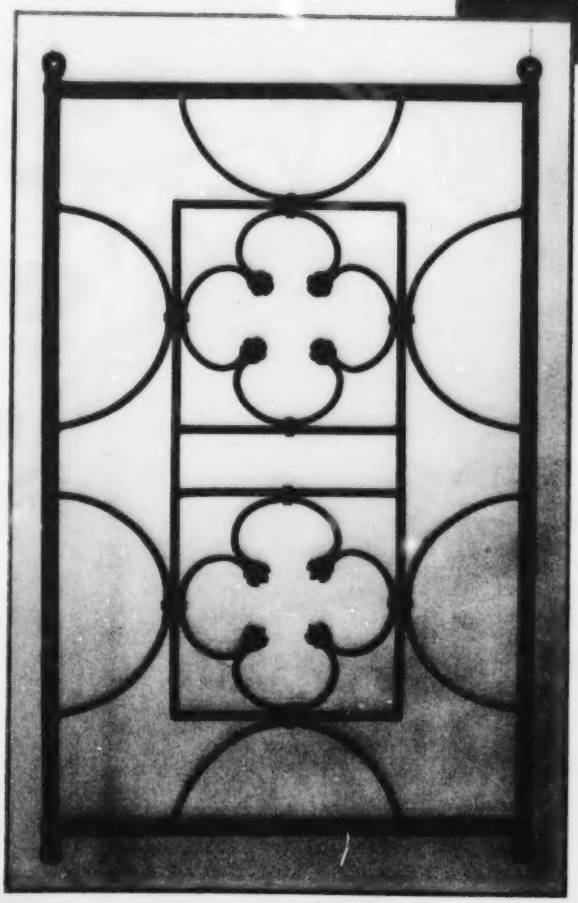


Samuel Yellin
Bank Teller's Screen
Chase National Bank, New York City, NY

Wrought Iron Strap Hinge
Washington Cathedral, Washington, DC

Francis Whitaker
at his forge
Carbondale, Colorado 1996

Francis Whitaker 1906 - 1999

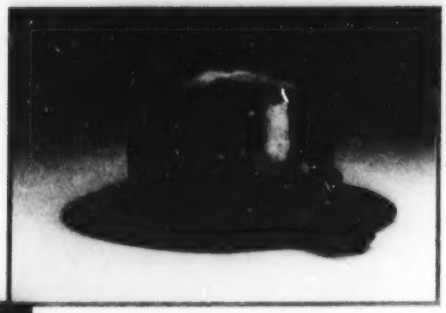


Francis Whitaker and Christopher Huck
Window Grill with Quatrefoils
Master Class project
Forged steel and copper rivets
Carbondale, Colorado
Lunenburg, Nova Scotia

"Iron has a strength no other material has, and yet it has in it, at the same time, a capacity for being light, graceful, and beautiful. It has this capacity - but no desire. It will do nothing by itself, except sit there and resist you. Even when it's heated, it remains stubborn and has, at best, the consistency of lead - sort of mushy and sticky or spongy. All the desire, and all the knowledge of how to impart this desire to the iron, must come from the smith."

—Francis Whitaker

Elizabeth Brim
Odessa
Mild steel
Penland, North Carolina



"Just as my mother and her mother, in my work I am making the world as I want it, reflecting on what I was raised to be and what I have become. Sometimes I am making fun of myself, sometimes telling a story, sometimes keeping the Dancing Princesses out of trouble. I enjoy delicacy and softness, and the fact that they are made permanent with my choice of steel as a material."

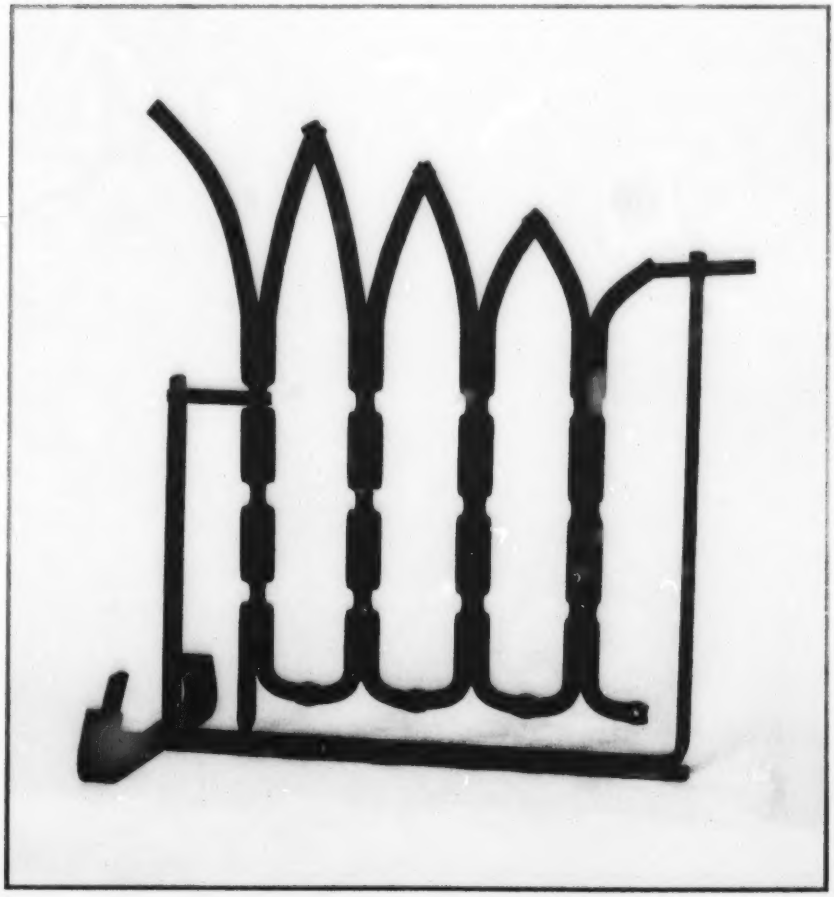
—Elizabeth Brim

Traditionally a gate has a frame and inner 'filling', and is intended for security purposes. This is especially true in the Gothic, Renaissance, and Bcroque styles. The goal I wanted: To define a garden gate from our time period using sculptural elements."

—Stefan Dürst

"I find that the public is becoming more and more interested in good work in various lines of art. If a man is truly an artist, he must impose on an unwilling public standards of perfection to which it is not accustomed."

—Samuel Yellin



Stephan Dürst
Gate
Forged steel
Münich, Germany

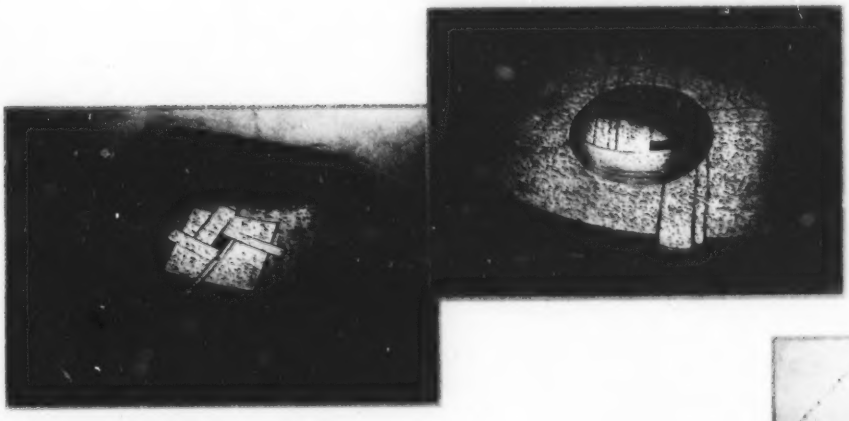
"I am a staunch advocate of tradition in the matter of design. I think that we should follow the lead of the past masters and seek our inspiriation from their wonderful work. They saw the poetry and rhythm of iron. Out if it they made masterpieces not for a day or an hour but for the ages. We should go back to them for our ideas in craftsmanship, to their simplicity and truthfulness. The superficial and the tricky, which are spreading over the world of art like a disease, doom themselves to destruction. The beautiful can never die."

—Samuel Yellin

E. A. Chase
Geometry Lesson
36" high
Forged steel
Santa Cruz, California

"Having spent my time during the sixties and seventies experimenting and essentially self educated in smithing, it was with great enthusiasm, and even greater humility, that I became aware that I was not alone in my interest. Not only did I find myself looking at an entire movement, but realizing many other smiths had better technical skills and were busily involved in sharing what they knew."

--E. A. Chase



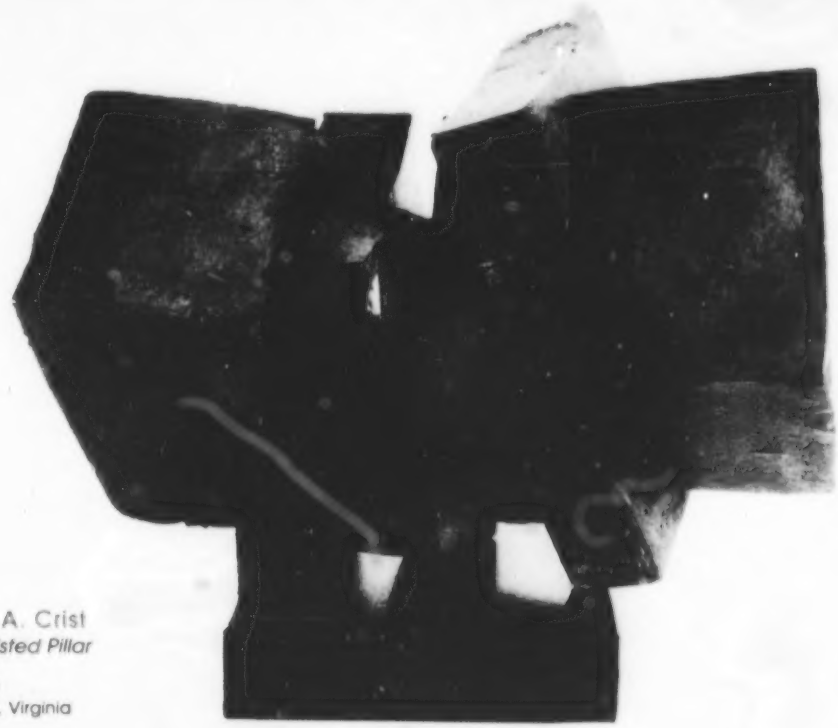
"As the search for understanding continues, I am pulled, thankfully, from the comfort of all that is familiar and drawn towards that which I do not know. A diverse field of reference nurtures and stimulates my curiosity. Naturally, the more varied the source, the more lively my exchange."

—Tom Joyce

Tom Joyce
Inlaid square bowl
Rectangular pieced plate bowl
Inlaid square bowl with hole and skewed extensions
Forged iron and mild steel
Santa Fe, New Mexico

"History is our basis for learning. All our knowledge has a direct relation to our past; who we are and what we do in our art is due to the ideas and advancements of those who worked before us. Though I cherish that tradition in blacksmithing, I seek something different. I seek new forms which are the adaptation and reinterpretation of that tradition. The integration of traditional joinery into the sculptural works, and sculptural forms into the functional works, is one way of adapting the past to the present."

—Frederic A. Crist



Frederic A. Crist
Double Twisted Pillar
7.5" x 9" x 7"
Forged steel
Waynesboro, Virginia

"There is only one way to make good decorative ironwork and that is with the hammer at the anvil, for the heat of creation and under the spell of the hammer, the whole conception of a composition is often transformed."

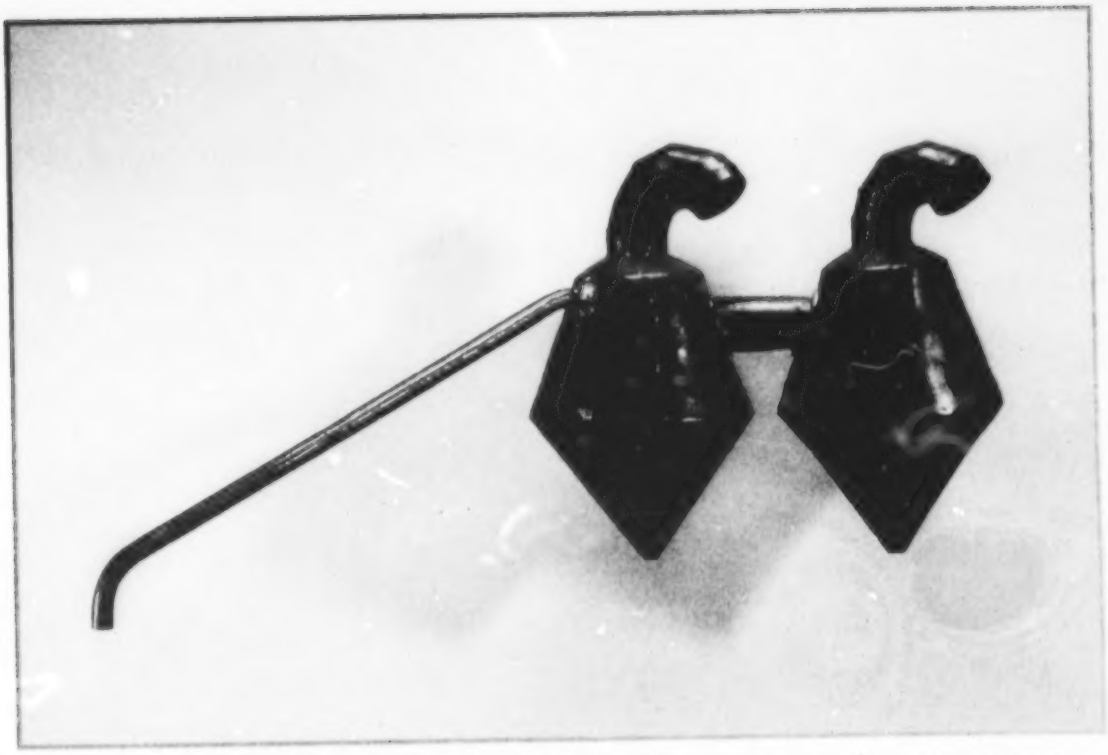
—Samuel Yellin

Fred Borcherdt
Traverse Marker
16" x 12' x 51"
Forged stainless steel and stone
Bonita, Arizona

"The relationship of form to function as exemplified in old, worn tools is a characteristic I use to impart a feeling of age as well as utility. Old tools - which I collect - have a mystery and romance from a past when individuals made their own tools as they found the need."

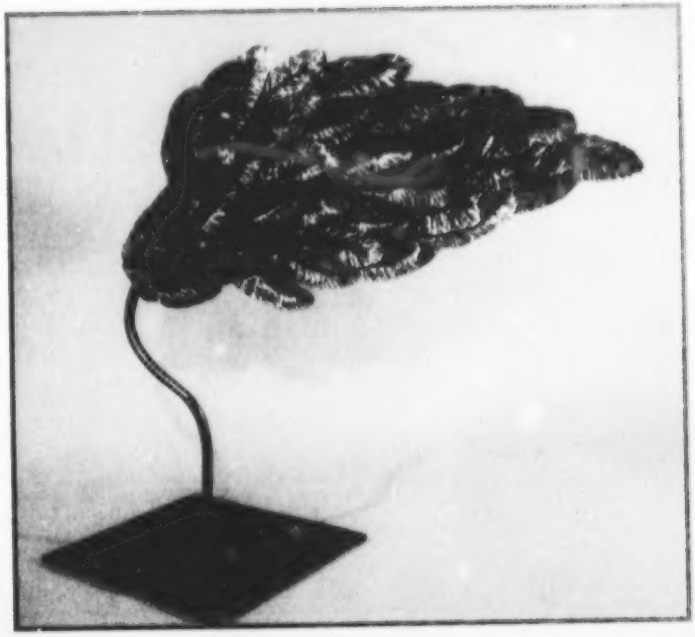
—Fred Borcherdt

Christina Shmigel
Expulsion
7" x 7" x 30"
Forged and fabricated
Steel, brass
St. Louis, Missouri



"I like the heat and the adrenaline of smithing. I like the way attentive labor becomes a kind of meditation."

—Christina Shmigel



Laurie Fisher
Angel's Wing
36" high
Mild steel and copper
Lunenburg, Nova Scotia

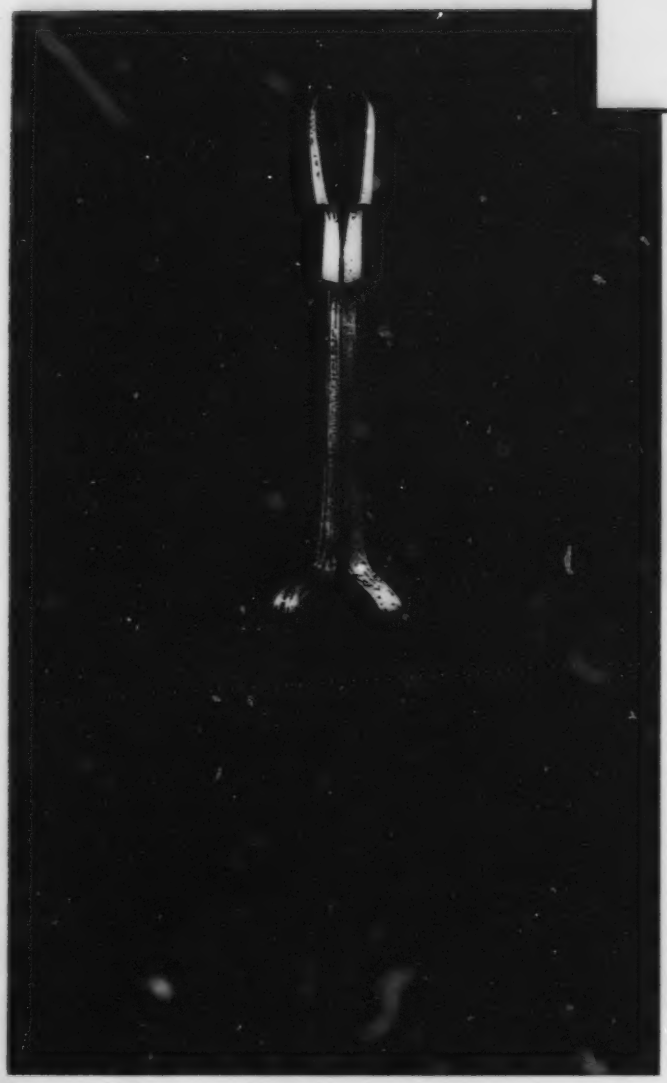
"The process of forging easily follows the heaven, earth and man model of Japanese Zen. First there is the initial vision, which is the heaven element. Then you take stock of your tools: the anvil, the hammer, the forge, and the metal. That's earth. The actual act of forging is a very intense, very human tango with the elements of fire and air and strength. It involves the entire body. Timing is important, senses are primed, and the sweat rises, like dancing or making love."

—Laurie Fisher

Brad Silberberg
Container for Biblical Proportions
Silver Springs, Maryland

"I try to give my work a feeling of timelessness and age - like relics dug up from some ancient tomb. The marks on their surfaces are a visual vocabulary I have developed with stamping tools of my own design and making. They not only decorate but directly shape the metal."

—Brad Silberberg



"All of my work is honestly and simply done... and the nature of the material is truthfully expressed both in handling and finish."

—Samuel Yellin

Russell Jaqua
The Consort
55" x 1" x 1"
19th Century wrought iron
Port Townsend, Washington

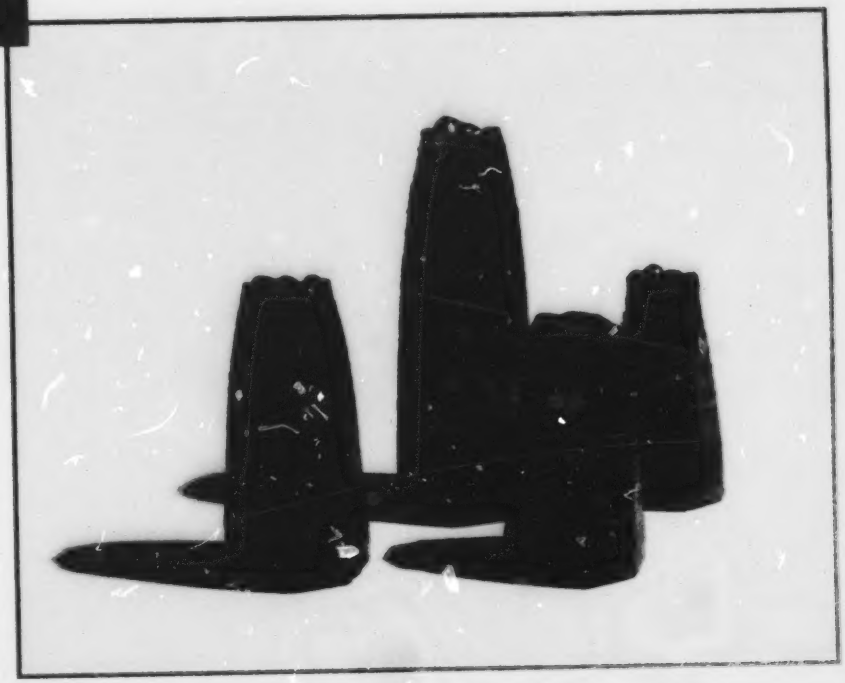
"As a metalsmith specializing in forgings, I take a standard, milled bar or plate of steel, and through the hot process of forging, I transform this parent material into a living textured form."

—Russell Jaqua

"Although iron is the least expensive of all metals, there is no other material which lends itself to more beautiful treatment."

—Samuel Yellin

Rico Eastman
Nautilus
Mild steel
Sante Fe, New Mexico



Sebastian Hepp
Vase Series
Forged steel
Münich, Germany

Takayoshi Komine
Tranquillity Metall #15
50 x 50 x 35cm
Stainless steel and copper
Kikigun, Saitama, Japan

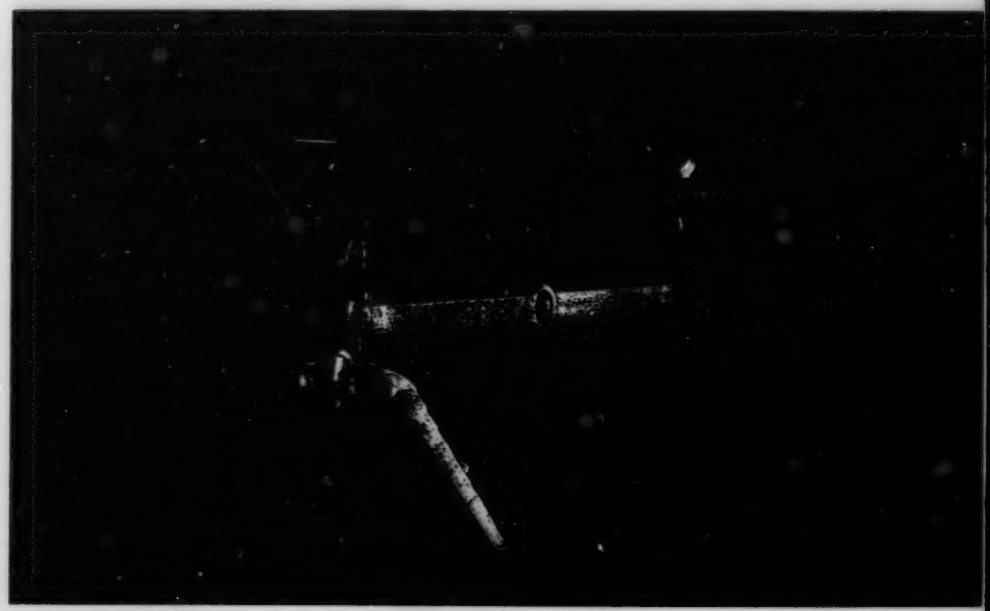
Stephen Yusko
Threaded Oil Can
5.5" x 5.5" x 2.25"
Forged steel
St. Louis, Missouri

"I have been told that I am too particular - too discriminating. I wish to say that it is impossible to be so. If people are allowed to be content with things which they call "good enough," the arts will never reach a high level. If the best is worth seeking, one should be content with nothing but the very best. And the best can be given in a little handle costing $5.00 as well as in a gate costing $10,000. They should both be executed with the same amount of love and yet I receive inquiries such as this:

My Dear Mr. Yellin,
Enclosed please find a scale blue print showing an iron balcony. Send us one estimate the way you do it also an estimate the way the other fellows do it.

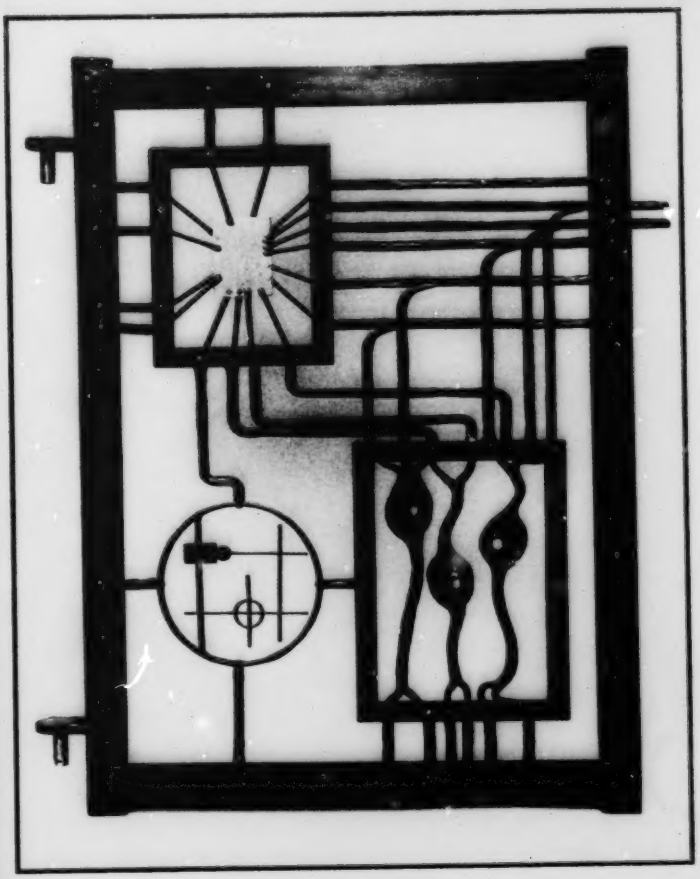
—Samuel Yellin

David Zatz
Iron Horse #4
19" x 22" x 32"
Forged steel
Brooklyn, New York



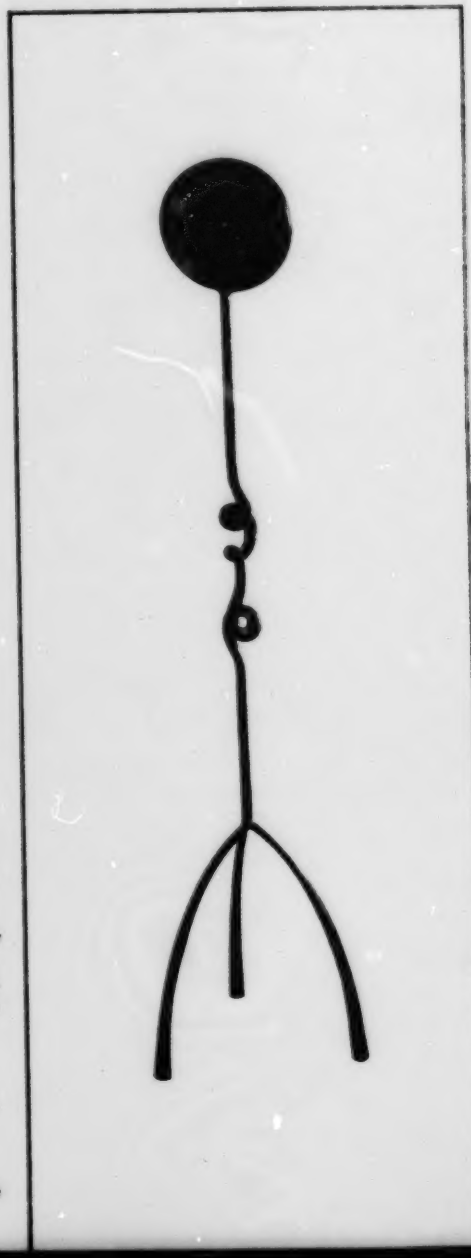
"Roughly five years ago I began work on an evolving series of glass-topped coffee table bases. I visualized a simple, restrained form wihch would have mortise /tenon/ rivet construction as its primary decorative theme. The idea I had was primarily a contemporary design, with some strong geometric lines, but I wanted it to lend itself to traditional tastes as well."

—David Zatz



Michael Spencer
Interface II
One of three gates for the CAD Centre
of the Technical University of Nova Scotia
Italy Cross, Nova Scotia

John Little
Grandfather CLock
62" high
East Dover, Nova Scotia



It is with keen interest that I look forward to the advancement of much better work in every line of art, and feel that the only way this can be attained is to begin at the very foundation, that is, it should begin with the architect who has so much to do with art in general. Let us better educate ourselves whenever we may have an opportunity. The best can be just as easily procured as that which is not quite as good.

Samuel Yellin

"Strike while the iron is hot! There is no time for thought or contemplation after the iron has reached its critical temperature. Once laid on the anvil the work must proceed automatically and surely to its conclusion. Even the slightest lack of confidence or hesitation will immediately compromise the work. Add to this the fact that the smith can never directly touch his material, but must always work through intermediate tools, and one begins to understand the potential frustrations of this enterprise."

—John Little

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of David and Margaret Fountain.

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and
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